

Halo: Ocean's Shadow

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Summary: A Covenant strike team seizes a critical ONI research facility. The dark secrets they uncover there may prove dangerous for both humanity and the team of rookie Spartans sent in to reclaim them.

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****1632 Hours, September 20th, 2552****

****Location:**** Red Sea Research Facility, Tantalus

"Oh, God, please, I don't want to-

Bernard Dalthorn covered his head and choked back a scream as Chang's cry was drowned out by the whine of plasma fire. From where he cowered behind a potted plant he saw his colleague topple to the floor, a smoking hole burnt through his torso. More plasma shots hissed through the room, cutting down the laboratory technicians who tried to make a run for the hallway.

He could hear the aliens shouting in the corridor. Guttural barks, savage hissing, high pitched chirps and whines; Bernard recognized them all from the security briefings and news vids.

The Covenant had breached Red Sea.

Several pairs of feet—or claws or talons or whatever it was these monsters walked on—scuttled into the room. Bernard fought the urge to scream as the invaders plugged more plasma bursts into the corpses of Chang and his companions. He thrust himself even closer to the ground, hoping against hope that the floor itself might open up and swallow him whole. In another moment they'd find him, and then he'd be lucky if he got a death as quick as the others.

A door at the other end of the room slid open. The Covenant soldiers squawked in surprise as gunfire—beautiful, clattering

_gunfire_â€"split the air. Bernard risked a glance around the plant in time to see three avian Jackals fall amidst their victims.

The troopers who had killed them darted into the room. They were dark-armored Navy security, or at least two of them were. The third was a woman wearing nothing but a standard Navy uniform. Bernard scrambled to his feet as he saw the emblem of a lieutenant on her shoulder.

"Lieutenant Morenz," he gasped, trying to hold back his nausea at the site of his colleagues' mangled bodies. "Thank God you're here."

The last time he'd seen Morenz, she'd been manning a desk outside his work room. Now she held a sidearm and directed a fire team of three security troopers as they took up positions by the doorway. Her uniform was torn and scorched in several places and her hair, usually pinned up to precise military standards, was ragged and askew.

"Mr. Dalthorn," she replied, her voice tight. "You need to get out of here. Pull back to Bravo Wing, this area's already overrun."

Bernard stepped gingerly over corpses, wincing as blood stuck to his loafers. "Overrun? What are you talking about?"

"We just lost contact with the command center." Morenz looked away from Bernard and back down the hall. "Our fireteams keep reporting new breaches all over the facility. We've put out a distress call, but until they can send reinforcements we need to get you and the other civilians to safety."

Plasma fire echoed down the hall. Morenz and the troopers stiffened, taking aim and searching for the unseen enemy. Bernard stood amidst the corpses. He felt utterly helpless. He was unarmed, unarmored; even if he did have a weapon, he barely knew how to operate a pistol, let alone a rifle or one of the Covenant's bizarre weapons. He was useless.

_All these years I've spent designing weapons to fight the Covenant, he thought bitterly. _And now that they show up, I can't do a thing to stop them._

How fitting.

"Mr. Dalthorn," Morenz said again, the edge in her voice sharpening. "Get out of here."

"How could this happen?" Bernard asked. He stepped over the bodies, backing away towards the door the troopers had come through. "How could they get so many warriors this deep into-"

"Doesn't matter," Morenz snapped. "Get to Bravo Wing. Helios is coordinating the defense. If that damned AI doesn't unseal the classified wings I'm going to-"

Bernard never found out what Morenz planned to do to the facility's coordinating AI. Something hissed in the corridor outside and then two silver prongs came out of nowhere and ran the lieutenant clean through.

The security troopers yelled in alarm as the energy sword withdrew.

Morenz sank to her knees, arms wrapped around her gut, as a burst of plasma fire scorched the nearest trooper's face off.

The two remaining troopers fired wildly into the hall. Bernard could only watch in horror as their bullets clattered off a wall of energy that erupted directly in front of them. Shrouded in its energy shield, the hunched form of a Covenant Elite faded into view as the bullets overwhelmed its active camouflage unit.

The red-armored alien towered over the stricken lieutenant and her fire team. Bernard froze, halfway through the door. Even from across the room he could see the warrior's reptilian eyes gleaming as it surveyed the carnage before it. The four mandibles that composed the alien's mouth spread in a hideous facsimile of a human smile.

The Elite raised its plasma rifle and blasted one trooper across the room with a burst of plasma. Its sword swept back up and cut through the remaining man's body armor like a hot knife through butter. The warrior stepped past the dying trooper, its eyes scanning the room until they settled on Bernard.

The researcher froze. The Elite's mandibles moved in some alien gesture as it moved further into the room. Bernard's eyes flicked from the warrior's eyes to its sword to its plasma rifle and then back again. His hands shook; his body felt as if it were made of ice. This was the end. Even if he fled now, the Elite would overtake him in two strides and cut him to pieces. Why hadn't he fled when he had the chance...?

From where she still knelt on the floor, Morenz let out an agonized whimper. One of her hands stretched out, reaching for her fallen pistol.

The Elite glanced back, as if only just remembering that she was still alive. It clicked its mandibles and, with the disinterest of an afterthought, stretched its plasma rifle out and shot the lieutenant through the back.

The sound of the blast shook Bernard out of his stupor. He turned and sprinted through the corridor and down the hallway. The Elite would be on top of him at any second, but he didn't care anymore. If he could just get through the corridor, if he could just make it to B-Wing...

He slammed into the wing access door at the end of the corridor. Plasma fire echoed down the hallway behind him. With a desperate cry he slammed his hand against the biometric scanner. Nothing happened.

"Come on!" he screamed, striking his palm down on the scanner again and again. He had come so close, why wasn't it working?

The intercom system above the doors clicked on. "All personnel," rasped the voice of Helios, Red Sea's resident artificial intelligence. "Be advised, Covenant presence detected in _all_ wings of the facility. Security teams, switch to emergency protocol bravo. I will delay them as long as I can."

Bernard struck the panel so hard his hand went numb. What did Helios mean, all wings? Morenz had said B-Wing was safe. It had to be, her

team had just _come_ from there.

The intercom hissed. Helios's voice scraped over the speakers again, but this time it was fainter, more urgent.

"Be advised, the Covenant have breached my servers. They are cutting off my access to the mainframe. Initiating self-decommissioning as per the Cole Protocol. Transferring systems access to-

The intercom fell silent. Helios was gone.

With a sob of desperation, Bernard slumped against the panel. It was over. He was going to die here. All his research, all his years of work here at Red Sea, it would all amount to nothing more than ashes and scorched plasma residue.

Something was moving in the corridor behind him. Bernard didn't look back. _Just make it quick,_ he begged silently. _Don't let me feel it._ He was going to die, it was the only thing he could hope for.

Above him, the intercom crackled to life.

"What are you doing?" a new voice demanded. Bernard looked up, stunned. This new speaker was a woman, young from the sound of it but with a hard edge of authority to her voice. "Don't just stand there, run!"

Bernard nearly fell over as the door slid open. He scrambled on his hands and knees through the doorway, practically sobbing with relief. "Thank you... _thank you_"

"Don't waste time, you have to run!" the voice ordered. Bernard was all too happy to obey. He scrambled to his feet and fled down the hallway. There was no sign of anyone, human or Covenant, but after his close shave with death Bernard welcomed the empty corridor.

"The distress call the facility put out has been received," the voice explained, speaking to him through the station's PA system. "It will take a few hours, but help will come. I know they'll send reinforcements."

"A few hours?" Bernard didn't know if he should be horrified or relieved. "So I just have to stay alive for a few hours?"

"Don't worry," the voice said. "I may be shackled, but I can help you. Just get to this wing's data control center and we'll work from there."

"Shackled?" Bernard slowed his pace. He was already out of breath; for years his only source of exercise had been the treks from one research wing to another. "You're an AI?"

"Helios wasn't the only unit assigned here," the AI told him. "I'm afraid your clearance level wasn't high enough for you to know about me."

Bernard wasn't surprised. In all the years he'd worked for the Office of Naval Intelligence, he'd grown used to all their secrets and paranoia. No matter how high you climbed on the clearance ladder,

there was always another realm of things you weren't supposed to know about just above you. "And now?" he panted, approaching a corner.

"I'd say a Covenant raid is worth a few breaches in clearance levels," the AI replied evenly. "Call me Juno."

"Alright, Juno." Bernard rounded the corner. An elevator hummed a few yards away. That would take him down a few levels to the data center this "Juno" had told him about. "I guess that makes you my guardian angel, huh?"

"It isn't my place to judge," Juno said. She sounded pensive, not quite as certain of herself as she had a few moments ago. Bernard walked towards the elevator, wondering at her sudden change in tone. "But perhaps you don't deserve an angel, Bernard Dalthorn. Of any sort."

Bernard glanced up at the ceiling's speakers, blinking with surprise. What was Juno talking about? Could she know about...

The elevator's doors slid open before he could reach them. A troop of Covenant, a mix of the avian Jackals and the stocky, gas-mask clad Grunts stared at him in surprise. Bernard froze.

"Run!" Juno ordered, the edge of command back in her voice. The lift doors slid shut far earlier than they normally would have, but several of the alien soldiers had already leaped out into the hallway.

There was nothing to do but obey. Bernard turned on his heel and sprinted down the corridor. There was no confusion now, only the old, desperate fear.

Plasma blasts and needle rounds streaked all around him. Bernard could do nothing but duck his head, run, and pray that he really did deserve a guardian angel after all.

End
file.